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# *ON ADVANCING BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS IN THE TREATMENT AND PREVENTION OF BATTERING: COMMENTARY ON MYERS*

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Myers offers an important challenge to behavior analysts: eliminating the battering of women. In this commentary, we extend the conceptual model advocated by Myers, urge a bidirectional approach that focuses more on the battered woman and less on the battering man, caution against the indiscriminate use of marital therapy approaches, and argue that the most important contributions in the field may come from behavioral prevention rather than treatment interventions.

DESCRIPTORS: violence, spouse abuse, battered women, intrafamily violence

Myers (1995) addresses a significant and underresearched social problem in a most compelling way. He paints a poignant picture of the magnitude of the problem of violence against millions of women each year, both as a primary health problem for women from their teen years to midlife and as a widespread social affliction that costs American businesses between $3 and $5 billion annually due to absenteeism stemming directly from domestic violence (Engelken, 1987). Myers argues cogently for the application of behavior-analytic techniques to this problem, and offers examples of the conceptualizations that could be derived from such an analysis. We support the theme that Myers develops throughout the article, and in this commentary we will suggest some extensions that might be made to help interpret the process of battering and to identify the potentially most effective interventions to treat and ultimately to prevent battering of women. Specifically, we will attempt to sharpen the focus on the different levels of analysis articulated by Myers, offer additional specification of the challenge of changing the process, suggest a less unidirectional approach to conceptualizing the process of battering, advocate a shift in targeting intervention from focusing solely on the batterer to increased focus on the woman being battered, urge caution when using controversial interventions such as marital therapy with violent couples, and we will argue for earlier, more preventive interventions.

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## *Levels of Analysis*

Myers delineates a number of factors that are likely to influence the batterer's violent behavior. We believe that it is important to clarify the different levels of analysis in considering these factors. Figure 1 illustrates our rendering of the differing etiological factors for abuse according to levels of intervention. At the societal level, Myers offers a convincing case that general attitudes and beliefs about violence against women in which the media and society at large not only condone but actively model physical force as a method of controlling women are still prevalent in the United States. We add to his model some of the other molar correlates of battering,

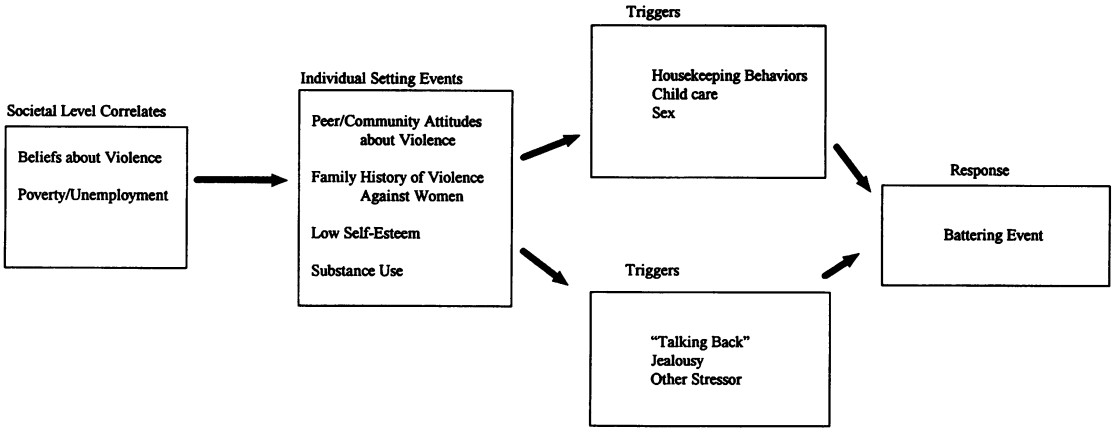


Figure 1. Model of antecedents for battering.

such as poverty and unemployment (Lewis, 1987; Strauss, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980).

Moving down a level, advocacy and modeling of violence by one's peers and fellow community members are described as potential setting events by Myers. We add variables such as a family history in which violence was a frequent interpersonal currency (Murphy, Meyer, & O'Leary, 1993), low self-esteem in relation to persons and roles outside the family that may elevate intrafamily control as a reinforcer (Neidig, 1984), and substance abuse (Heyman, O'Leary, & Jouriles, 1995; Pan, Neidig, & O'Leary, 1994) as important risk factors.

Finally, there are the triggers or precipitating stimuli. Some of these can clearly be identified as discriminative stimuli because they define a situation in which violence will clearly achieve a goal such as insuring that the woman completes household chores, attends to the children, or has sexual intercourse with the batterer. Other stimuli may appear to the casual observer to be elicitors, and the battering may seem to be a respondent rather than an operant. For example, a woman's "talking back" or attracting attention from another man may seem to provoke uncontrolled violence. However, we agree with Myers that even such apparently provocative behaviors are best thought of as discriminative stimuli as well, because the battering is reinforced by the cessation of these unwanted behaviors. The woman stops talking back, appearing to flirt, or engaging in other behavior the batterer finds objectionable (Cascardi, Vivian, & Meyer, 1991).

In various places during his conceptual analysis, Myers suggests that there need not be a specific discriminative stimulus for a beating; "her presence alone can serve as a stimulus for verbal abuse or battering" (p. 495). This interpretation is typically derived from the woman's rather than the battering man's report; she may not be aware of cues that are salient to her partner. It may be more logical to suggest that either some extrafamilial stressor or alleged slight from within the family serves as a cue for the controlling, violent responding of the batterer. Assuming that something cues the male batterer to apply physical force to regain control seems to be more reasonable than assuming that the behavior occurs spontaneously, for no apparent reason.

Myers tends to focus on the male batterer. In a way, this is only logical, because it is the problematic behavior of the male batterer that appears to require change. However, as we will discuss in the next section, his behavior is the least likely to respond to change voluntarily. Myers does describe a few of the potentially motivational characteristics of the battered woman, but as we will argue later in this commentary, his analysis is incomplete. Further-

more, Myers tends to address the batterer and the woman who is being beaten individually and in isolation, rather than considering their mutually dependent interactions. First, we will describe why focusing on the batterer is a problem, and then we will consider some other alternatives.

*Challenge of the Batterer's Behavior*

Among the most difficult responses to change are those behaviors that are followed immediately by positive consequences and only later by negative consequences. Such classic self-control problems, which include cigarette smoking, obesity, and substance abuse, are mentioned by Myers, but the way in which such self-control deficits relate to battering is never articulated. For batterers, responding violently to the triggers or discriminative stimuli previously described is immediately reinforced. The long-term cost of battering to the domestic relationship is both intangible and temporally removed. Thus, even if batterers did wish to alter their behavior, it would likely be very difficult, given what we know of this pattern of immediate reinforcement, with delayed and uncertain punishment. Furthermore, as Myers points out, there are inadequate incentives for most batterers to change a response pattern that fits with their history and is functional for them in day-to-day life.

What about an external vehicle of change? Currently, the negative consequences (such as arrest or incarceration) seem to have little impact on such behaviors. This is partially because such acts are unlikely to come to the attention of law enforcement officials, and if they do, are unlikely to be adjudicated (recall that Myers points out there are 0.37 jail sentences per 100 assaults—less than 1% punishment is a weak schedule indeed). It may also be the case that even if it were possible, as Myers argues, to make arrest and incarceration more likely, this temporally removed variable punisher would not outweigh a temporally proximal reward that is highly probable. The limited success shown by programs to treat batterers described by Myers should not rule out future efforts in this area, but should suggest the wisdom of examining other targets as well.

*Targeting the Battered Woman*

Curiously, if we were to outline a model for the societal correlates and individual setting events for the battered woman, they would be similar to those of her battering partner. Just as the batterer believes that violence is an acceptable control device, the battered woman often has accepted that those upon whom she is dependent will exhibit anger and violence to control her (cf. Crittenden, 1988). Many have been abused by previous boyfriends or husbands (Lewis, 1987). Poverty and sometimes substance abuse (Kantor & Straus, 1989) set the stage for her to be helpless in the domestic situation, and she is also likely to have a family history of abuse and low self-esteem (Kazak & Segal-Andrews, 1992; Margolin & Burman, 1993).

There the similarity of the model breaks down. In the batterer's model, battering is the behavior to be predicted. It is not clear what behavior of the battered woman is relevant—the behavior that "provokes" the abuse? As Myers notes, the woman is often not sure what she did to elicit the abuse. It seems that Myers is trying to predict a response deficit rather than an excess here. Myers states the critical behavioral question "Why do they stay?" but what he seems to mean is "What keeps battered women from leaving when leaving seems so adaptive?"

*An Interactional Model*

To extend Myers' behavioral analysis of the battering situation, the typical physical beating is an immediate punisher; the literature suggests escape from the punishing agent when possible. However, being homeless and without means of emotional or financial support—the immediate consequences of escape—are likely to act as formidable punishers for leaving. In addition, the battered woman often expresses the strong fear

that leaving will not only fail to end the threat, it will likely increase her danger. The choice becomes lesser versus greater immediate punishment. Myers makes passing reference to a series of responses that have been described clinically as "tension building," "acute battering," and "calm, loving respite" (Thatcher, 1988) that work as a behavioral chain. The beating is often followed by the batterer's remorse, gifts, affection, and promises that future violence will not occur if the batterer is forgiven, along with subtle (or perhaps not so subtle) threats concerning what will happen if she does not forgive and stay on. So leaving is punished immediately by giving up home and a male partner, and staying or returning is both positively (e.g., gifts, affection) and negatively (by the temporary withdrawal of threats) reinforced (Giles-Sims, 1983; Lederer & Jackson, 1968; Pagelow, 1981). In turn, by staying, the woman avoids any long-term negative consequences that might have occurred for the batterer and continues to reinforce the use of coercion and threats. The complex playing out of these contingencies that support both parties' predictable patterns of responding is necessary to understand the intransigent nature of this response class.

*Toward Future Interventions*

One of the strengths of the conceptualization offered by Myers is the differing levels of potential for intervention. Clearly, changing attitudes towards violence on a societal level is very important, as are strengthening legal sanctions regarding violence toward women. Whether or not changing the laws actually results in less battering, a firm societal stand against such violence seems to be essential. These community-wide interventions pose one set of challenges for behavior analysts, who have shown some degree of previous success in such endeavors (see Fawcett, Seekins, & Jason, 1987, on seat-belt legislation as an example).

The role that individual behavioral interventions for the batterer, the woman, or the couple will play in the future is less clear. Myers discusses the application of behavior analysis as posing a research measurement problem, but it appears that selecting appropriate interventions is a much greater challenge than is measuring outcomes. In the absence of legal coercion or the threat of dissolving the relationship, most batterers may have little motivation for change. The individual most motivated for behavior change is likely to be the woman, if a way out of the punishment cycle can be arranged. It is misleading to regard shelters as an intervention. Shelters are clearly only a stopgap solution, to allow an immediate but temporary cessation of punishment.

Marital therapy has considerable appeal as an approach for couples who do not want to separate, and several models for intervention have been suggested, including cognitive behavioral (Deschner, 1984; Mantooth, Geffner, Franks, & Patrick, 1987) and systems methods (Neidig & Friedman, 1984). However, these interventions have not been empirically validated with women who have been battered. Indeed, there is little controlled outcome research in this area; thus, couples therapy for couples with domestic violence problems should best be regarded as more controversial than Myers suggests. Dutton (1992), for example, states that couples interventions assume the violence is rooted in the interaction, and implies that members of the couple are equally responsible. She recommends it with caution, only after a number of conditions are met. The threat of abuse, including emotional abuse, must be greatly reduced, the violence should have ceased for longer than the longest previous lapse, and the couple must both agree to work on repairing a relationship damaged by abuse. We emphasize the importance of free consent by the battered woman along with a therapeutic environment that takes into account that the woman's verbal behavior may well be less open and honest in the presence of the batterer. For this and other reasons, some researchers advise against ever using marital therapy for battering.

Myers suggests that behavior analysts could

contribute to all existing types of interventions, but we argue that they should also design new interventions, based on their identification of relevant avenues for behavior change. What is necessary, according to the analysis we have offered, is a diagnostic process to identify those couples (if any) for whom behavioral marital therapy may be effective and those women who need to leave the relationship. For those women who are better off by leaving the relationship, massive skills training (ranging from problem solving, daily living, and assertiveness skills to job training) as well as the provision of social support and child care are likely to be necessary to escape the coercive punishment cycle of battering. Behaviorists have a variety of technologies (including self-monitoring, self-reinforcement, modeling, and rehearsal) that can be applied once a detailed analysis of relevant needs is conducted. Myers devoted only a few lines of his section on assistance to women to this issue; the behavioral literature has been similarly remiss. This is an area in which our science could make substantial contributions.

Given that certain histories (that punishment will be used to control behavior in a family relationship), skill deficits (job skills, assertiveness), and societal conditions (poverty) can predict battering, it is important for behavior analysts to do more than treat violence. It is essential that we use both community-wide and individual interventions to diminish the possibility of a woman residing in an abusive relationship. There are an increasing number of programs oriented toward nonviolent conflict resolution in adolescents (e.g., Rosenberg, O'Carroll, & Powell, 1992). There are also a few behavioral programs that directly train adolescent males and females to communicate and work out relationship differences in noncoercive, nonviolent ways (Wolfe, 1994). Early data appear to be promising in terms of skill building. The ultimate impact on repeated cycles of violence remains to be seen. Behaviorists have a great deal to contribute to efforts to effect long-term prevention of battering, and yet very few scientists are stepping forward to meet the challenge.

Myers has made a decided contribution to the behavioral literature by summarizing the current trends and practices in this area. His greatest contribution, however, will be realized if his review inspires others to go beyond the present literature to use behavioral technologies in innovative ways, not only to treat but ultimately to prevent future violence against women.

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